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THE CULTURE AND CONFLICT REVIEW



Ridicule as a Tool for IO/PSYOPS in Afghanistan

Michael Cohn and Paul Sims, 4/1/2010

An old Persian proverb states, “A bad wound heals, but a bad word doesn’t,”^[1] meaning a cruel tongue can always do more harm than a sword. It may be safe to say that this popular adage rings true across all time and cultures. Similar versions of this proverb can be found throughout the world – for death is always immediate, but the pain of insult can linger for years. Simply put, nobody likes to be made fun of. No one likes their weaknesses and vulnerabilities to become the focus of public amusement. Very few can avoid self-conscious embarrassment when they become the ‘butt of a joke’. To be the target of mockery and social disapproval can be more humbling than any loss incurred on a battlefield and cut deeper than any blade.^[2]

The culture of Afghanistan is patriarchal and communal at its very essence. Almost universally amongst the various ethnic groups throughout the country, a man’s honor and reputation are of primary importance. This point cannot be underestimated. Jealously protective of their image, most Afghan men are intensely conscious and perpetually vigilant to the faintest slight or compromising situation. Because of the very public and communal nature of social relations here, both men and women are under constant personal, familial, and public scrutiny to abide by specific codes of conduct and meet certain social and religious standards. As such, most Afghans are particularly sensitive and attuned to matters of honor and social reputation. And as in any culture, the more conservative the personal orientation, the more consuming the social pressure to fulfill socially-prescribed roles, and/or the more public the persona, the more vulnerable to humiliation and social ridicule one can become.

Such ridicule has been used as a weapon of war in the region for millennia. There is, for example the old Arab institution of the hidja, dating back to tribal times, referring to the practice of reciting satirical poetry belittling the enemy on the eve of battle. The Prophet Muhammad himself deployed warrior poets ahead of his invading armies to soften the targets through mockery and derision intending to discourage support for any resistance and weaken morale of the remaining combatants.^[3] Similarly, Afghanistan has a long tradition of warrior poets, famous not only for glorifying war, local heroes and tribal victories, but for lampooning enemies and belittling competitors and other tribes in their lyrics, tales, and songs.^[4]

This form of weaponized humor can be any speech or action intended to cause contemptuous laughter at a person or thing^[5]. It is a peculiar combination of humorous shaming directed at an individual’s weaknesses, physical and psychological abnormalities, socially-unacceptable behavior, mistakes, and/or mishaps which are intended to delegitimize an individual or group’s prestige, undermine their authority, charisma, and seriousness, and ultimately tarnish their public image. Such aggressive use of humor can range from comically defined physical assaults (pranks, practical jokes), through visual representations (such as cartoons), to verbal acts running on a scale from an ad hoc sarcastic remark, song, poetry or parody, to a play by Aristophanes. The most common verbal prototype is the “put-down” joke.^[6]

Being made to look like a fool amongst audiences in which the target demands respect usually provokes the target – all the more, if the audience finds it entertaining. Often a target’s response to such derision is defensive, emotional, and hasty - typically reinforcing the accusations and furthering their own parody. The ability to psychologically manipulate your enemies like this can be a particularly potent advantage in any conflict, and thus it is worth exploring its potential use for IO/PSYOPS in Afghanistan.

Understanding what can undermine an Afghan in the eyes of their peers will allow us to better know

how to do so. Appreciating what Afghans find funny and shameful allows us to develop a much needed sense of cultural intuition regarding what constitutes ridicule amongst Afghans. With a proper sense of the absurd, in the Afghan context, we increase our ability to relate to populations and disseminate messages that resonate in a more engaging and memorable way. Operationalizing the use of humor and ridicule as a tool of IO/PSYOPS in Afghanistan could increase the coalition and GIRoA's ability to undercut Taliban leadership in the eyes of their followers and supporters, provoke them into rash and hurried decisions, mock or trick combatants into laying down their arms, create divisions and doubts in multiple forms in the enemy camps, lessen their power to intimidate and weaken their omnipotence in the eyes of the rest of the population. In order to do this, there needs to be some culturally specific guidelines as to what is funny and what constitutes ridicule in the Afghan context. It is to this end that this paper is dedicated.

The capacity to perceive something as being funny is universal; there has been no human culture without it. At the same time, what strikes people as funny and what they do in order to provoke a humorous response differs enormously from age to age and from society to society. Put differently, humor is an anthropological constant while being a culturally relative value.^[7] However, despite this relativity, the paper works from the assumption that there is indeed something like a national sense of humor, which will usually be further differentiated by region, ethnicity, and class.^[8] Humor, like all other forms of communication is transferred through the use of specific signals. These signals are diffused through entire social groups or societies, and people learn them in the course of socialization along with the rest of the socially constructed symbol system of their culture.^[9] While the ability to laugh and be funny is innate, what one laughs at is learned.

Every AO requires specific knowledge of the target audience in order for the message to be effective. But one cannot possibly COMPREHEND foreign humor without 1) speaking the language well, and 2) knowing the culture by living there. With that in mind, one can at least begin to relate to foreign humor through a thorough survey of historical and cultural artifacts, interviews with various Afghans, and personal observation and analysis. Although this paper is meant to be informative, a native Afghan's perspective must be consulted before any creation of products, in order to achieve the local nuance necessary for optimal resonance.

This article is primarily for IO/PSYOP personnel and professionals operating in the Afghan theater, but much of the content could also serve as a general reference/primer for any individual, military or civilian, deployed to Afghanistan or simply interested in learning more about Afghan culture. The method utilized to characterize the Afghan sense of humor and identify targets for ridicule will be a qualitative synthesis of research on Afghan culture, bringing together various aspects of indigenous literature, folklore, myths, legends, superstitions, and poetry coupled with subject-related interviews conducted with native Afghans and supported by background research in the psychology and sociology of humor. While several examples will be provided, the focus in the following pages will not be to describe how each and every element of Afghan culture can be transformed into a dissemination-ready IO/PSYOP project. Much more generally, several relevant aspects of Afghan culture will be listed to reveal the sense of values which provide conceptual guidelines that will be informative when developing properly-attuned Ridicule Narratives. The format will first consider the Afghan sense of shame and then explore examples of Afghan humor in some detail. Additional aspects of Afghan culture will be then be provided to give further context to deploying ridicule in the Afghan theater. The paper will conclude with some thoughts on Taliban vulnerabilities that could be targeted for ridicule.

The Afghan Sense of Shame

To ridicule properly, one must first learn what stigmatizes Afghans and only later what makes them laugh. Guilt and shame can be an extremely coercive form of persuasion. The Taliban consciously target these emotions to influence the populations they seek to intimidate and control.^[10] Afghan culture is highly conservative, patriarchal, traditional, and tribal/communal. In such an environment, an individual's honor, social status, and personal code of conduct are largely determined by the institution of the family. Maintaining family discipline is a cherished ideal, as it gives a man a good name and enhances his prestige in the community. Individuals are encouraged to avoid committing actions that negatively affect the name and status of their families or bring disgrace.^[11] In social, political, and economic terms in the village, you have to maintain your honor or become extinct.^[12]

For all Afghan men, but particularly for Pashtuns, survival in his village depends on his maintenance of his manliness, the approval of his family, and his adherence to a standard of honor – whether this standard is Pashtunwali or another tribal/ethnic/party code. Being waykar, a man of honor, is the primary

focus of an Afghan man's identity. If you are an honorable man, and all the men from your extended family are honorable men and your family will be able to compete for good arranged marriages and economic opportunities. Without his manhood and honor, an Afghan has nothing.[13]

There are several aspects to Afghan manliness that could make him vulnerable to ridicule:

- Behaving like a coward, appearing effeminate, weak or submissive is often viewed as an inexcusable offence, punishable by public mockery and social ostracism. There are several Persian and Afghan short stories and anecdotes that refer to mothers rejecting and disowning their cowardly sons.[14]
- There are a number of insults Afghan men use, both playfully and maliciously, to imply another is the receiver in a homosexual act, and thus weak, submissive and effeminate.
- An Afghan male should be hailed for his strength, bravery, cunning, self-reliance, virtue, and most importantly, self-control – if he comes off petty, dependent, overly sensitive, emotional, or hot-tempered, he will likely lose the respect of his peers and influence in his community. “A man who cannot control his emotions is a weakling who deserves no respect and has nothing useful to say.”[15]
- Many rural Pashtun men are constantly on guard about anything that might hurt their public reputations – and the behavior of cousins reflects directly on a man's reputation. If a cousin makes himself seem braver, better, or more successful, than then a man will feel compelled to match the cousin or put him back in his place.[16]
- Breaking one's promise or fickle loyalty, while common in Afghan culture, is also seen as a sign of spinelessness among the Afghans.[17]
- And as in most other cultures, ignorance and foolishness are embarrassing vulnerabilities/weaknesses to be concealed from others at all costs.

The value system which informs these guidelines for reputable conduct derives from a combination of two sources: Islam and Pashtunwali.[18] Appearing irreligious, lazy, cheap, gluttonous, selfish and uncharitable, hypocritical, immoral or religiously unobservant, marrying or cavorting with non-Muslims, and sometimes non-Afghans, or to be assumed to engage in gross corruption are all grounds for familial and communal disapproval based on Islamic principles. Massood once famously remarked about Hekmatyar – “He is a man without religion who belongs not even to a sect.... he is a joke.”[19] On the other hand, appearing unwilling to avenge one's honor, wife or female family-member or family's honor, defend his property, country, or culture, demonstrate hospitality to visitors or mercy to surrendering enemies and those in need are all considered dishonorable through the lens of Pashtunwali.[20]

The Afghan Comedic Formula

Most Afghan jokes, to westerners, seem illogical and enigmatic. Academic materials concentrating on an analysis of the Afghan sense humor are virtually non-existent. It's not just that you can tell a joke, it's also a matter of how you tell them. Wit, jokes, and satire are always conscious products, and their production depends on a social situation in which the comic producer has a certain audience. Cultural norms and learning play an important role in determining how humor is used and expressed in social interactions, and what topics are considered appropriate for it.[21] Really, only local cultural competence can fully appreciate turns of phrase, local references, the use of metaphor, and dramatic exaggeration. When telling a joke or humorous anecdote, punch-lines are discernable by the teller's pitch, rhythm, and other paralinguistic and kinesic patterns as well as more-or-less obvious closure with regard to content. All can, and do, vary by ethnicity, locality, language,[22] as well as social and economic position throughout the country.[23]

A rich oral tradition of folklore, poetry, proverbs and jokes has developed in Afghanistan – one that is still very much a part of the collective conscious, whether rural or urban Afghan. “His native land is ever dear to an Afghan, and there is hardly any nook in the mountains or a corner of his own village that does not bring remembrances of past glory or around which ancient myths and legends are not woven.”[24] Great battles and victories are woven into poetry and song, silly tales of kings and viziers, their sons and daughters, princes and princesses, wives and old women often end with someone receiving their just desserts. In Persian fairy tales there is always a hero, who does the right thing. And

there is always a lesson learned and a moral to the story. The concepts of love, jealousy, war, heroism, and the like run through the literature of the Hazaras, Baluchis, Uzbeks, Turkmens, and others as well.”[25]

The majority of Afghan comic tales concern fools and their absurdities, persons with some physical handicap or affliction, such as baldness or deafness, and impostures of one kind or another. Values relating to religion, governance, personal ethics, and sexuality are often cleverly intertwined. Hundreds of tales, anecdotes, proverbs, and aphorisms all subtly or explicitly, generally or specifically, praise proper behavior and admonish the audience to right actions and attitudes through parody and the shifting of fortunes between archetypal protagonists.

Common Comedic Techniques/Forms

Most investigators would agree that humor involves an idea, image, text, or event that is in some sense incongruous, odd, unusual, unexpected, surprising, or out of the ordinary.[26] Jokes, humorous stories, proverbs, poems, and songs all, more or less, ultimately consist of a set up and a punch line. The setup, which includes all but the last sentence, creates in the listener a particular set of expectations about how the situation should be interpreted. The punch line suddenly shifts the meaning in an unexpected and playful way, thus creating the perception of non-serious incongruity – often between the sublime and the ridiculous. [27]

There are several common techniques/forms running through Afghan comedic tales:

- Proverbs - Afghans continually use one-liners and proverbs in order to give an example, make a point, defend a position, or to emphasize the importance of an issue.
- The Use of Wit and Cleverness in moral fairytale – often contrasted with foolishness.
- Practical jokes, silliness, nonsense formulas - sometimes in rhymed prose, but with humorous content, in the form of non sequiturs or preposterous brags.
- Self-satire
- Word-play - innuendo, double entendre, verbal play, the use of hyperbole, rhetorical plays on assumptions, euphemisms, allusions, symbolism, and processes of literalizing the figurative, a basic strategy of humor.
- Sexual adventure/misadventure and rowdy sexual humor[28]- stories of sexual ignorance; explicit or implicit sexual overtones, sometimes subtly tantalizing and teasing; the use metaphor and allusion in the sexual context to refer to sexual anatomy, often through the use of food imagery or farming tools.
- Earthly humor and animism
- Riddles and cryptic counterstatements - riddles are another form of prepackaged humor, closely related to jokes, which often involve a play on words and are particularly enjoyed by younger children. Many stories contain riddles or enigmatic statements. The solution to these riddles may be the motive for a quest, or the condition imposed for releasing a prisoner or winning the hand of a princess. Sometimes the answers to the questions are expressed by means of gesture, as a form of signal/sign language - by pointing to a pool of donkey urine, by setting fire to a turban-cloth, by exchanging clothes with the vizier, breaking pots, etc. Sometimes stories contain “Neck Riddles”, which require a solution to save one's life.

Common Comedic Themes

There are also several common thematic trends to be found throughout Afghan folklore, music, theater, and comedy:

- Cleverness – craftiness, resourcefulness, cleverness, trickery, and betrayal are all held as the highest of art form in Afghan culture. Examples are the figure who outwits all his opponents, but humorously, becomes trapped in his own net of intrigue; exploiting technicalities in contracts/aggreemnts; sleight-of-hand; the use of tricks and deception to shift fortunes or teach a lesson; sometimes a protagonist will feign ignorance and gullibility, humorously acting foolish, to catch a competitor off-guard. Many of these stories twist fortune so the manipulator becomes

the manipulated or one's own words or actions are used against them.[29]

- Foolishness – cleverness' corollary - fools, foolishness, buffoonery, ignorance, incompetence, culpable forgetfulness are typical traits of main characters or story plots. Two foolish swindlers may try to swindle each other, the humor deriving from misunderstandings arising from their respective ignorance. A number of tales depict stupidity as a family affliction. Many times, such humorous exaggeration and presentations of the absurd can act as a screen for pointed criticism.[30]

- ° Rustic foolishness – Given Afghanistan's rural character, farfetchedness often comes in the comic portrayal of hyperstupidity and earthy humor, whether exaggerating an ignorance of modern ways or humorizing some aspect of rural life or work, which may seem disgusting or uncouth to a modern urbanite.[31]

- Ethnic Humor - tales of fools can move to ethnic slur, stereotyping, and sly didactic admonition. Ethnic jokes, playing upon local dialects and other cultural features to build up local stereotypes, of say an ignorant countryman. The stupidity and disloyalty of menial tribes is a typical platform for a number of ethnic jokes. Almost every Afghan knows the standard jokes about ethnicities or specific provincial characteristics that have been passed through generations, such as those about stupid people from the province of Wardak and tricky ones from Laghman. The Mongols are a common ethnic group targeted in Herati humor. Ethnic humor works to build solidarity among teller and listeners by lampooning the "otherness" of some third group. Ethnic humor and ethnic stereotypes tend to focus on the target groups practices with respect to food and sex and accuse the group of confusion of basic categories and disorderly behavior around these topics. Aside from sex, one could add death and religious practices to the basic list of topics for stereotype construction. Also to be found are several forms of dialect jokes focusing humorous attention on difficulties of speech and weird accents.[32]

- Physical, Bodily, Sexual Humor – themes of sexuality, gender roles, off-putting bodily functions, reference to body parts, and rowdy sexual humor are common in prepackaged jokes and riddles as well as in regular conversational humor.[33] Confusion of food and sex is a common theme in ethnic stereotyping - food metaphors are also common currency for euphemizing sexual matters in everyday speech. There are numerous examples of ironized sexual invective, supposed sexual and social naiveté of the women of another group, wives as sexual aggressors, the predatory nature of mother or son-in-laws, sexual euphemisms and allusions to nature, such as "big pine", satirical attention to sexual foolishness, sexual promiscuity, sexual frigidity, and so on.[34] Importantly, there is a specific sexual dimension of the honor of Afghan men that depends on the virtue of women (Namus).[35]

- Social Order and Good Governance – There is a long and pervasive tradition of Afghan skepticism of central authority, noninstitutional moral authority, autonomy, intense egalitarianism, and demystification of state power.[36] A host of populist critiques of a state which cannot fully protect or provide services for its citizens, nor fully realize the Islamic ideal of social order has taken form in a rich body of oral tradition – folk farce, self-declared imaginative fiction, jokes and anecdotes, and other nonnarrative critical forms. Islam, legitimate and illegitimate authority, politics and governance, and ethnicity emerge contrapuntally, none being wholly obscured for long and each providing an opening into one or more of the others.

- ° Pretentiousness, hypocrisy, and gullibility are the three roots of Islamic religious humor. Faith itself is not maligned as delusional or ludicrous, only the attempts of foolish and corrupt people to approximate it.[37]

- ? The bribe-taking judge, incompetent official, or parody of a mullah are saturated with overt and implicit Islamic ideology. Islamic themes emerge differently in shifting portrayals - religious leaders, usually behind their backs, become the butt of jokes in villages. Corruption of disciples by masters, or vice versa, is one humorous topic in a very extensive body of traditional Muslim anti-clerical humor.[38]

- ? The regulation of sexuality in storytelling is also part of traditional visions of social order and good governance.[39]

- ° An Afghan has always liked to grumble about his country - while loving it ardently, he

has always liked to find as many faults as he can find. But does not like to hear adverse criticism of his country or countrymen from others, and would certainly be offended if a foreigner were to agree with him.[40]

- Popular wisdom – there can also be found a vein of down-to-earth realism and popular wisdom characteristic of a peasant society, even in the most fantastical tales. The style of the tales is always stark and economical. Descriptive adjectives and metaphors are comparatively rare. There is belief in miracles - extraordinary feats are performed by fakirs, saints, and persons skilled in sorcery. Jinns or spirits haunt the sinful or prideful.[41] Hard work is rewarded. Often a seemingly irrelevant detail is introduced at the beginning of a tale that later proves to be of vital significance. Most of these tales contain a blend of wit, fantasy, comedy, and romance.[42]
- Belief in Fate, Destiny, and Luck – Most Afghans have a mindset of “inshallah” (God Willing), which views man as impotent in the face of destiny and the mysterious design of Allah. If a man is destined to succeed, he will do so despite his blunders, whereas if a man is destined to die, his intelligence will not save him. Luck is famously more valued than intelligence in several famous Afghan folktales and jokes.[43]

Current Afghan Comedy

Sigmund Freud defined wit and sense of humor to be the process of sublimating repressed anxieties of the unconscious. For Freud, discovering what a people find funny depends on the dominant social and psychological controls and stresses of their environment.[44] By identifying the taboos, sources of social awkwardness and/or disapproval, and collective memories of pain and anxiety, one finds the dominant repressed ideas and motivations of a society, and likely discovers what they likely use as subject-matter for humor. The current Afghan comedy scene lends some credence to this view.

In a country that had been stung by successive violent regimes, humor has long been a trusted coping mechanism. Comedy in Afghanistan thrived from the 1800s until the 1960s, when Afghans held actors in high esteem and Kabul's royal family frequented theaters. But after the Soviet invasion of 1979, actors slipped out of the country and comedy declined. During the factional fighting in the early 1990s, mujahedeen literally blew the roof off the once-stately theater that used to show Molière and Chekhov adaptations. When the Taliban arrived in 1996, comedic theater came to a standstill.

But even when in power, the Taliban were the butt of jokes - behind closed doors - that targeted everything from their spot checks for shaved armpits (a rule in Islam) to the radio call-in show where people dedicated songs by mullahs (minus the music, of course). Like others, Afghans have used humor to channel dissent, avoid aggression, and let people separate themselves from the ruling group.

In plays and TV shows, Afghans seem to find the terrible funny. Topics often seem more apt for tears than big laughs — child marriage, corrupt cops, the poor behavior of international troops, heroin addiction, high food prices - Rattled off in rapid-fire, the standard method of delivery. In recent years, a new generation of comics has increasingly used humor, parody, and political satire. One of the most popular shows on Tolo TV, a private cable station in Kabul, is “Lahza Ha,” (Moments). It's the Afghan equivalent of Candid Camera, where pranksters stop Kabulis on the street and con them with gags. The show is so well liked that some Afghans pray early so they don't miss it, and jokes are rehashed the next day. Another show, called “Alarm Bell,” has been particularly hard-hitting, an Afghan version of Comedy Central's “The Daily Show.” It has mocked corrupt and incompetent leaders, even showing actual videos of parliamentarians sleeping in session and throwing water bottles at each other. Other comedians perform spot-on impressions of a Taliban soldier, an Afghan drug addict, a Chinese bride, inept officials, bribe-taking policemen, and others. They don't actually make any changes to the behavior of their target. They simply go for as realistic a version as possible, and rely on the fact that they're not the person they're mocking to get the laughs. Though, in a country where officials and insurgents are reputed to be thin-skinned, the comics are often treading on dangerous ground. Contestants on “Laugh Bazaar” never mention top Afghan officials by name, even while they insult Pakistani President Perez Musharraf and President George W. Bush directly – seeing it dangerous to name local names.[45]

Comedy is also being currently utilized as civic education in Afghanistan. Before the first presidential elections, a Kabul-based nongovernmental organization hired actors to promote voting in some of the country's most remote southern villages. Hundreds of people saw each show. Women's turnout in Paktia province, which borders Khost and is very traditional, so much so that women are rarely seen in

public, was among the highest in the country. The success of the shows, Afghan observers say, illustrates how effective humor and theater is for educating a public with a low literacy rate (only 64 percent of Afghans can read). It may be, they say, the best way to unify the country's four major ethnic groups that are still quietly split along ethnic lines - one of the major obstacles to lasting peace.[\[46\]](#)

Ridicule – Afghan Style

Ostracism

In Pashto, the word for ostracism is Shah-rel. Ostracism basically means making some one or some group an outcast. It is a way of enforcing social norms of behavior which has been found all over the world, from the aborigines of Australia to the ancient Greeks. It is a central part of Pashtun social code as well, and it is part of the fabric of Pashtunwali. It is also the basic cultural corollary to the use of ridicule for IO/PSYOPS.

Ostracism is a powerful social weapon in closed tribal societies like the Pashtun. In America, if you manage to alienate your entire neighborhood, you can always move to a new one. This mobility is not really possible within a closed tribal group. There is a major compensating element of Pashtunwali which emphasizes personal freedom, but this is really a façade. Tribal Pashtun life is very conformist. All members of the tribe are expected to stay within their proper lanes of behavior. To enforce this, there is evidence of a long tradition of formalized ostracism in Afghan culture. [\[47\]](#)

There is a spectrum of ostracism, from the very mild forms of teasing and making jokes about someone's inappropriate behavior (behavior which doesn't conform to what the community expects), all the way up to killing the person if they don't "shape up and fly right." The mildest form of ostracism is gentle teasing, or paighor. This is a form of reproof wrapped in humor meant to remind the man that he is near the edges of the envelope of acceptable speech or behavior. This sort of thing is often seen in teasing.

Perhaps the next mildest form is complaint, or gila, from the community. If a clan member's actions or behavior are irritating the clan, members of the community may try to alleviate the problem with gila. An example cited by anthropologist Niloufer Qasim Mahdi is that of a Pashtun man being rude to elders, which is unacceptable within Pashtunwali. In such a case, members of the community may approach the man's family members to do gila. The family members will then discuss the issue with the man, and put pressure on him to conform to the accepted standards of behavior.[\[48\]](#)

Another aspect of ostracism is shunning. Shunning is the act of deliberately avoiding association with an individual. When a person is shunned, they basically become invisible to all other members, who do not "see" them or speak to them. This form of ostracism is still practiced among some Pashtun tribes in remote rural areas, when a family decides to exclude an individual from social activity. The shunning is not usually complete; the man might not be considered for marriage agreements, for example, but still participates economically in village life. This appears to be done on a family-by-family basis, rather than by an entire community. If a family makes this decision against some one they "have issues with," they cut off the social relationship with that person. This practice is called meRai- jhwandai neh kawel. MeRai means death/ funeral, jhwandai means mostly weddings and/or other festivities, neh is not and kawel is the verb "to do." In other words, they do not participate in each other's funerals or weddings, which is a dishonor for the families having the funerals or parties. The operational use of this would obviously be to encourage rural families to exclude those families in a village who provide sons to the enemy from the village's social life, a powerful social tool to discourage enemy recruiting.[\[49\]](#)

Kashunda or exile is practiced among some Pashtun tribes, including the Mohmands, and involves a person who has committed an act likely to provoke the reprisal of being sent away from the tribe. This is a terrible punishment for a people who live as a collective organism and whose life support system is the tribe. In other words, the person has committed acts which will adversely affect the whole village; therefore the person has been exiled to detention to protect the village. Rural Pashtun culture operates on the principle of collective responsibility -- the whole village is collectively responsible for the action of each individual. [\[50\]](#)

Insults

A man has to maintain his honor. The Pashto term dah' uz means "man of no honor." No family wants to marry their son or daughter into the family of a dah 'uz. When Afghan men want to insult each other, there are many words like Daoos, mordagaw (Pimp), Eazak (effeminate), Konee (Catamite), Koss

Mather (Motherfucker) and sentences like Matherat ra gayam (I fuck your mother), Khwaharat ra gayam (I fuck your sister) and Zanat ra gayam (I fuck your wife) they use to insult each other, playfully and/or maliciously.[51]

Calling someone “impotent” and saying that his “balls are tiny” are other grave insults. Where Americans would go for more of the “penis insult” (i.e. the pleasure aspect of sex), Afghans focus more on the “functionality” of sexual body parts (i.e. producing offspring and thus fulfilling the male role in the family). Since casual sex is supposedly rare in Afghanistan, being attractive to women isn’t thought of as too important, as long as the husband can satisfy his manly duties. The “catamite” insult demonstrates that you’re only gay if you’re the catcher. The “giver” gets to retain his strength, dominance, and manhood.[52] Another insult is to say that a man has a heart made of glass, signifying that he is a coward or easily discouraged[53], thus weak-willed and fickle like the derogatory stereotype of women.

From innumerable interactions with various groups of Afghans, a penitent for teasing became apparent through the course of research. In order to tease, nag, and just generally poke fun and get on their nerves of another, Afghans, like Americans, make each other self-conscious of a particular behavior, competency, or personal characteristic. Often the focus doesn’t even have to really be truthful and/or malicious; simply the harping on one aspect of another repeatedly can really get under their skin. Particularly when it is something they think take pride in, think they are good at or employed to do - even if it’s small and inconsequential, like a particular way a cook makes soup. Constant ragging on a singular thing, even if not necessarily true can make them, like us, feel self-conscious and become defensive. This would be particularly easy to deploy as an IO/PSYOPS campaign, by focusing on one flaw in a leader or other target and releasing multiple products with a similar message.

Conclusion: Targeting the Taliban

Those who laugh together, are together.[54] Laughter and humor can help solidify the cohesion and solidarity of a group. Ridicule is the deliberate/targeted use of humor for purposes of attack, ostracism/alienation, and humiliation. Like satire, the aggressive intent becomes the central motif of comic expression. All elements of the comic are then, as it were, welded together into the shaping of a weapon. Satire can be expressed in visual art – as in the caricature, which, in modern times, has become a common and effective instrument of political attack. Most commonly, of course, satire manifests itself verbally and as a form of literature. It always involves irony. Like the martial arts, it always uses the adversary’s strengths against him and thus turns them into weaknesses. A particularly effective version of this is parody, in which the adversary’s own words are used against him.[55] The use of such humor, designed, targeted, and disseminated properly, can help bring various like-minded groups together, while simultaneously distancing and delegitimizing uncooperative and anti-government elements in the process.

Because of their behavior, the Taliban are easy targets. Factions remain acutely susceptible to ridicule, mockery, and all forms of ostracism. Besides their reputation for the provision of swift justice, they generally enjoy minimal community support apart from that garnered through intimidation and coercion. Based on the values, codes, common themes and techniques discussed above, humor and public mockery in the form of cartoons, jokes, stories, TV shows and other media could be immediately utilized, with the help of native Afghans providing local nuance, to delegitimize uncooperative power players, provoke them into hasty decisions, weaken the cohesion of their camp, and lessen the appeal and/or power they have in the eyes of local populations. Those unwilling to reconcile can be shunned, badgered, and humiliated into irrelevance.[56]

The Taliban are vulnerable to tribal rifts, rivalries and conflicts, as much as any non-insurgent Pashtun community is. The Taliban remain conscious, and vulnerable, to the damage done to the movement’s political capital by the incorporation of criminals into the movement during the “open door” recruitment policies enacted in 2003. Infighting among Taliban factions is another key concern, something that has been recorded steadily over the past two years. Clashes routinely break out between rival Taliban factions concerning war booty, territory, respect, and in some areas, lucrative narcotics issues.

This leaves plenty of room for cleavages to form and be exploited. Opportunistic predatory behavior is interfering with Taliban tactics and strategy, and corrupting the organization from the district level on up, infecting provincial level leadership as well. Media reports from this summer speculate a financial drain of the “central treasury” was partially caused by corrupt and greedy tactical and district level commanders who helped bleed resources for their own self-interests and caused inner-Taliban rivalries based on economic domination of specific territories.

The Taliban also prohibit the use of young males “that have no beards” for jihad.^[57] This is a direct contradiction to the numerous instances when the Taliban have trained and used children for combat purposes: including beheadings (mentioned above) and suicide bombings. This may have something to do with their desire to keep the pre-pubescent and teenage boys for their sexual pleasure. Even if this is not true, there are several ways such a message can be implied through jokes, stories, and/or parodies to embarrass, humiliate, or at least plant doubt in public perceptions.

The Taliban in general have always been disrespectful, if not outright violent towards village elders, systematically undermining their traditional authority. They have killed countless civilians, assassinated peacemakers, and terrorized villages throughout the country. They have levied unfair taxes, siphon off limited community harvests and resources, and have taken advantage of the Afghan tradition of hospitality. They continue to trample on several others respected Afghan traditions as well. They have behaved in ways that are clear affronts to cultural and religious values that have been hallmarks of Afghan culture for centuries. However, they have rarely been properly admonished for their balking or gross exploitation of certain tribal codes and religious norms. This paper has been an attempt to compile relevant cultural information to inform the use of ridicule and humor as tools of IO/PSYOPS against the Taliban and other anti-government elements in Afghanistan. With the assistance of native Afghans and detailed local knowledge, US/ISAF IO/PSYOPS should take note of the potential of operationalizing humor as a weapon to demystify Taliban power, weaken their ability to terrorize and intimidate, and further alienate them from the rest of the Afghan population.

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19. Antonio Guistozzi, *Empires of Mudd: Warlords and Warlordism in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press. 2009).
20. Ali, Op. Cit., 30.
21. Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier Press, 2007).
22. There are more than twenty distinct languages spoken in Afghanistan, plus various dialects.
23. Outsiders from Kabul would not necessarily be aware, for instance, that Mongols are known in the Herat area as makers and sellers of charcoal.
24. Ali, Op. Cit., 25.
25. Emadi, Op. Cit., 84.

26. Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (London: Elsevier Press, 2007).
27. The best examples of this are jokes and stories of the famous personality, Mullah Nasruddin. These are popular because they deal with the experiences of day to day life – he had been a tailor, a merchant, a doctor, a judge or a farmer, and he had traveled widely. Some of his stories, while narrating a funny situation, describe a fact and serve as advice for people.
28. Mills, Op. Cit.
29. See: *Nasruddin's Stories: Over 300 stories relating to the funniest situations of Nasruddin's life*, trans. into English by Dr. Ibne Amin and ed. by Fawad Ahmad Azizi (Peshawar and Kabul: Khawar Book Co.)
30. See also *Once Mulla Nasruddin*, ed. by Turaj Muhammad Rais (Shah M. Book Co, 2002).
31. Mills Op. Cit.
32. Ibid.
33. *Golab be surat*, literally, "Rosewater on [your] face", a phrase used, like the similar *gol be ru*, "flowers for [your] face" to apologize in advance for the use of language or subject matter which the might deem offensive. *Baradar gol*, "flower brother", the more intimate term of address which the storytellers substitute for *sayb*, "sir", when about to narrate a rowdy sexual or other potentially indecorous scene.
34. Mills, Op. Cit.
35. "Operational Pashtunwali," Op. Cit.
36. Mills, Op. Cit.
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54. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, Op. Cit.

55. Ibid, 160

56. "Operational Pashtunwali," Op. Cit.

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